



### Part 3

The name Bertin was all too common in New Orleans, but Roger Smithback hit paydirt again when he found, via a Google search, the obituary of one Gaspard Louis Bertin, 81, who had passed away six months before. The notice contained a photo of a man in a broad-brimmed hat. On a whim, Smithback went to the funeral home, where the funeral director remembered with displeasure the “viewing,” in which the body of Bertin had been maliciously and bizarrely vandalized—the director’s word—by none other than Pendergast himself. A young woman had been with him, who Smithback knew could only be Constance. This was a huge breakthrough, because it led in turn to a certain Father Fazande, who had presided over the interment, who told Smithback of a Madame Brissot, who, he said, had been a great friend of Bertin—and he’d gone on to mention that he believed she knew a thing or two about the Pendergast family.

Smithback found Madame Brissot at home, and what a home it was: an old plantation house on the Bayou St. John, in the midst of gardens, with two-story white pillars, surrounded by a sadly impoverished and decaying neighborhood. Smithback found the gate unlocked, and he firmly marched up to the porch and pulled a handle that was apparently the doorbell. A gong sounded inside. A stiff man in a butler’s uniform answered the door and stared at him with a frown. “We don’t accept soliciting,” he said, starting to close the door.

Smithback shoved his foot in and said, “I’m not selling anything, sir. I’m here to speak to Madame Brissot, if you don’t mind.”

“About what, may I ask?”

Smithback found himself getting irritated. “That’s my business, not yours.”

“*Everything* is my business. Remove your foot from the door or I shall call the police.”

Smithback had been in similar situations before, and he knew that now was a good time to loudly emphasize a few specific words. “Don’t get your boxers in a twist. I’m doing research on the *Pendergast* family and I understand *Madame Brissot* knew or knows them.”

This had the desired effect: he heard, from within, a chirpy voice say, “Did I hear the name Pendergast? Let him in, Maurice.”

The butler, with an expression of stone, opened the door and stood aside.

Bustling toward him was a rotund old lady, dressed in black as if in mourning, with sparkling eyes, a head of curly white hair, and chipmunk teeth. “And you are?”

“Roger Smithback,” he said with a little bow. “I’m, ah, a friend of Special Agent Pendergast, and I’m writing his biography.”



“How exciting. Please come in and sit down.”

He followed her through the foyer into a grandly appointed parlor, filled with dark paintings, porcelain, silver, and crystal. She took a seat and indicated for him to sit opposite her. “I shall order tea.”

Smithback would have preferred coffee but no matter. The order was given to a maid who had come out of the pantry when they entered.

Madame Brissot said, “How can I help you, Mr. Smithback?”

“Well, as I mentioned to the, um, butler, I’m writing the biography of Special Agent A.X.L. Pendergast. I understand you knew the family.”

A bright nod. “I knew the tutor, Monsieur Bertin, very well. He was a

dear, dear friend. And through him I was introduced to the family.”

“Very good. Well, I guess my first question is about the, ah, fire.” He laid his cell phone on the table. “Do you mind if I record?”

At this Brissot fell silent a moment. “I don’t mind—but why the fire? Why dwell on the negative?”

“The book’s going to be positive,” said Smithback hastily. “Very positive. It’s just that the fire is important. Both his parents died in it, leaving Pendergast an orphan.”

“I see.”

“Do you, ah, know what happened? I mean, why the mob burned down the house?”

Brissot folded her small hands in her lap. “Nobody knows exactly—or if they do, they don’t speak of it. What I do know is quite an awful story. Monsieur Bertin was in the house, and he barely escaped with his life.”

“How did he get out?”

“There was a secret passageway from the family crypt underneath the mansion to a nearby cemetery, that opened inside the Pendergast mausoleum there. Almost unique to New Orleans, the Pendergasts had a lead-lined underground family crypt beneath their house.”

Smithback felt that prickling sensation on the back of his neck again. This was great stuff.

“Go on, please, Madame Brissot.”

“It was because of that...that boy. Aloysius’s brother. He was always a strange one, but he had an accident that did something to his eye, and after that he was ungovernable. Not one of those hyperactive children though—just the opposite. Sneaky and secretive. Gaspard was their tutor, and he said to me that boy scared him more than anyone he’d ever met.”

The old woman seemed to go out of her way to describe him merely as ‘that boy.’ Out of curiosity, Smithback asked: “And this brother of Pendergast—what was his name?”

Madame Brissot went quite still.

“Ma’am?”

“*Diogenes*,” the woman said. Her voice was quiet and steady, but for Smithback it was as if the parlor unaccountably darkened with the approach of night.



Illustrations courtesy of Chris Royal. [For more about his work, click here.](#)